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Pulitzer Prize Winning American Poet at Story Moja Festival

Pulitzer Prize winning American poet Yusef Komunyakaa headlined the annual Storymoja literary festival in Nairobi during the weekend of September 16-18. The festival brings together international writers and literary personalities in a temporary tented city in the heart of Nairobi's downtown Uhuru Park. It is a place to celebrate stories, ideas, and writing through storytelling, books, and live discussion forums. Throughout the festival, Komunyakaa held audiences of all ages spellbound with readings of his work.

In one particularly moving session, after Kenyan poet Njeri Wangari discussed her inability to find words to write about the 2008 post-election violence that shook her country, she asked Yusef if he ever had a situation in which he felt compelled to write about a momentous event but words failed him. Without responding to the question, he picked up a book of his poems and read the poem he wrote following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans, his home town. The poem invoked powerful images of the storm and its aftermath that mesmerized the one hundred people in attendance. The soft lilt of his voice was in stark contrast to the harsh reality his words invoked.

Although he was in Nairobi for only four days, Yusef left an indelible impression on all those who heard him speak. Judging from the number of young people who crowded around him between sessions or asked him to pose for a photograph, he has true "rock star" status among the literati of Kenya.